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Local firms are clearing the air

By David Hare, Staff Writer

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada (RTC) are working to clear the air.

The public/private partnership aims to encourage employers to provide their employees with commuter benefits that reduce traffic, air pollution and fuel consumption through the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative.

Taking the lead in the initiative are Fremont Street Experience LLC, and NOS Communications Inc. According to EPA reports, these two Las Vegas companies collectively provide more than 1,000 employees with commuter benefits, such as subsidized bus passes.

Jolene Hicks, assistant human resources manager at NOS Communications, said her company decided to join the clean-air program as a service to its employees.

"It sounded like a good idea, helping to bring clean air to the valley," she said.

Sherry Copeland at Fremont Street Experience said the company subsidizes half the cost of a bus pass (\$30/month) for its employees who use the CAT Bus System.

The NOS Communication program subsidizes 100 percent of its employees' transit commute.

More than 200 employers in 23 states have joined the voluntary Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative, according to Stephen Offutt of the EPA.

He listed a number of reasons why employers should participate in the program.

"Getting to work nowadays is more stressful and time consuming for people.

An employer who looks out for satisfied employees should pay attention to the worker's commute, not just what goes on in the office," he said.

In other words, a happy worker is a productive worker, Offutt said.

Recruiting is another incentive for employers to sign up for the clean-air program, as Offutt explained.

"Only those companies who join the initiative can call themselves Commuter Choice Employers," he said. "Our goal is to make that term have value and be as common as 401(k) or health benefits.

"When someone is looking for a job in the want ads, they'll see 'Commuter Choice Employer' and know what that company has to offer."

In addition to helping employers find and keep satisfied workers, the initiative's other goal is to reduce the amount of air pollution and traffic congestion associated with America's automobile culture.

Last year the EPA listed Southern Nevada in the "serious" category for both carbon monoxide and PM 10, a fine dust derived from disturbed land.

In order to reach attainment for PM 10 and carbon monoxide, the county must first reduce the levels of those pollutants, and thereafter it must successfully maintain an air pollution control program.

EPA sanctions could cost Nevada federal dollars for highway improvement projects.

Brenda Williams of the RTC said the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative is the county's first step in reaching attainment status.

"We're trying to reduce the amount of single occupancy vehicles during peak commute hours," she said. "This program provides a great service to area businesses, as well as significantly reduces our carbon monoxide levels."